

Raising Pilgrims - Pilgrims Selling Chocolate Caramel Peanut Clusters

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May 9, 2022



You might imagine fundraising as a strictly money-making enterprise. Maybe you picture a gaggle of girl scouts pushing mints outside the local supermarket or you having to sell chocolate bars over the phone to your family members in hopes of reaching the expected sales goal for your child's soccer team. My wife and I some years back worked the snack shack at high school football games in place of us pushing relatives to cough it up. But the fundraising I am talking about here is fundraising as pilgrimage based on real events of the late 70s and early 80s.

Pilgrims selling chocolate caramel peanut clusters. Pilgrims selling chocolate caramel peanut clusters knocking on doors. Pilgrims late at night going bar to bar selling chocolate caramel peanut clusters. Is selling chocolate in any way like the pilgrimage of Abraham or Moses, or even like the 21st-century pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago? Yes, absolutely, although I would agree that, on the surface it sounds more like Forrest Gump and his travels through life with his box of chocolates.

Before I ever went on a fundraising trip, I thought, if I had a thought at all, that the experience would be something like that of my grandfather, a peddler of Knapp Shoes in southern Oregon. He was a poor and humble man. My only clear memory of him, scaly, pearly white legs dangling out of his bed at the convalescent home. Not a pretty picture, and not much to go on. Fundraising became important to me and to my life of faith when I joined the Unification Movement in January of 1976. I first learned to fundraise in that summer and, after learning the basics around Seattle, I made my first two-week fundraising trip to Canada. I was an odd choice. I was new to the spiritual life, shy, a loner type, hardly a salesman. Not one to chat up strange people; at least partly because I thought there couldn't be anyone quite as strange as me, myself, and I. I was a bit tied up in myself.



Jack was the captain. Before being "Captain Jack," and a church member, he and some friends had moved out to rural Sumas, Washington to live and work the land - hippie types, farming organically, logging with horses. There were four of us on the team - Kathy, Damien Jack and myself. Jack just loved people: the cranky, the sour, the dour, the high and mighty, the twisted, the poor who had fallen on hard times. Even the well-to-do whose arrogance would have wounded a lesser spirit. He swallowed them up with a smile. So, no matter, he never lost focus on the goal - loving people and working hard. Which meant all of us working long

hours. We were always on the go and the days flew by like a dream. My knots inside began to loosen up.

Jack was at least half a pirate - and half a saint. He had a smirk and a wink that said, "I am going to love the whole world; I am going to turn this whole place right side up no matter the mountains to climb or the cold-hearted blocking my way." He had that kind of confidence. And so, we three did what we could to imitate the pirate-saint. However, none of us could begin to imitate his feature-length storytelling, or the facial expressions that helped increased the dramatic effect. The stories helped buffer the bummer effect when we fell short of our goal - which thankfully wasn't often. Stories like the one of the high-class law firm. He related so well with the office manager of a law firm that he was able get into the executive suites where every single secretary and lawyer bought \$20 worth. His bread and butter were the stories of his positivity turning around angry or skeptical gatekeepers, the trolls at the front office. Jack's Ah Shucks mannerism, his steady faith and confidence - whether the spirit of God or the luck of the Irish - the wind was always at his back.

After a day of doing the town - shop-to-shop and door-to-door - Jack would pick us up to get ready for the "blitz" - hitting up bars, gas stations, and restaurants late into the night - a mad dash, like a series of short 100-yard sprints. We learned to adjust our demeanor with each location - the thumping bar with a dance floor or the lower volume give-and-take of a coffee shop. In some cases, you would go right up to people, shake their hands, and laughingly give them your spiel - with no worries, just having fun. In other situations, you lowered your voice and tried hard not to be rude or interrupt too abruptly their dinner

conversation. You developed a heightened sense of intuition guiding you to the right approach, the most authentic, the most natural way to communicate. Once your heart woke up.

In those days, when outdoor movie theaters were still a happening thing, we would hop the fence and fundraise car to car - carefully. Like a bunny, you hopped car to car, careful not to interrupt either sex in the back seat or an older couple so glued to the screen they would freak, or panic, as if assaulted. Fundraising in an outdoor movie theater - so outrageous, and so over the top that you felt that you were either going to meet the moment or shrink from the challenge and sort of slither away. Once you got rolling, tapping car window after car window, you felt perfectly normal - you were just a short commercial interruption. No big deal. If you kept that understanding, people would respond in kind. But, you never really knew what sort of reception you would get. Still, if you maintained the right point of view and focus, you would enjoy the heck out of fundraising the outdoor movie theater - no matter the movie. Around midnight our energies peaked and so, by 1am we began to come down from our high and refuel - at some late-night coffee shop or truck stop. Jack was an early mentor, my intro to fundraising as pilgrimage. Just months later, I was a fundraising team assistant, the one to set the "standard." The assistant was expected to work the hardest, and find the way to "break through" - finding the way to connect with people, spiritually. Not long after being the assistant, I began to lead teams out east as the "captain."

Heading east, the team packed simply in skinny bags that fit under the seats of the van. Our chosen fundraising product stacked strategically in the rear seat - as much as the space allowed. We were 10 in a 15-passenger blue Dodge Van, setting out from Seattle - twenty - somethings, men and women, brothers and sisters we called ourselves - committed to travel and raise funds - door by door, street by street, strip by strip, town by town. After finding our spots in the van, we began with an intention, a prayer. Headed to Yakima, the representative prayer asked to know love, to find patience and perseverance, and to reach our personal and team goals. The prayer was simple, earnest. The prayer was offered up, not as a way to cash in, but as a way to connect with the right motivation. And, to invite God along on our pilgrimage.

Our van was long, and wide, and swayed around curves. I called it the blue whale. Driving it felt like sailing. I was the captain of the ship, chosen at least partly because I liked it - the fundraising, the door to door, the quick parte with each opened door, getting the sense of people and the place they lived, the walking and jogging long distance up and down main streets, up and around blocks of homes or apartments; and the travel across the landscape of the northwest, the big sky setting of each town out east and the wet greenness of the land on the more populated west side, plus the very cherry - taking the ferry across to the peninsula, to Bremerton, or north over to Friday Harbor. And, I liked getting to know each town - How the pieces of a place fit together or didn't. The bigger houses up on the hill, the apartments squeezed in just behind the main drag; the town boundaries fading into rural farmland - or like the Tri-Cities, the edge of town fading into low shrubs, grass and dry dirt, the high desert. Each town had a character and a rationale for being. By the end of a day of fundraising, you got a real feel for a place - if you made the effort. My favorite trips took us out east for a week or 10 days to Cle Elum, Ellensburg, Selah, Yakima, Toppenish, Sunnyside, and then on to the Tri-Cities. The big sky country on the east side of the Cascade Mountains was big farm country too - apples, cattle and crops - all in need of irrigation dependent not on rain so much as snow melt. The air felt lighter out east and the spirit was lighter too.

We were young, idealistic for sure, and so new in our faith we were like newly planted seeds not yet above ground. We were off to greet the world world face to face, eyeball to eyeball. We would meet and greet hundreds of people, each one an exercise of the heart - a spiritual challenge: The mother putting her child in a minivan after grocery shopping; the bald, overweight man that looked the part of a used car salesman; the young couple looking gloomy, heads bowed, a strange look for such a cool sun-filled fall morning, the senior citizen happy to have you in for tea and talk you blue. How to approach? Would our spirits jive? It was a search, a quest to find them, and love them, see each person as the image of the Creator? Like seeing the world fresh, like seeing spring for the first time. Starting with seeing yourself anew. But like the weather - there were sunny days, and then the fog rolled in and seeing became a lot more difficult. People could be hard, and when people weren't buying, you could begin to turn on yourself. Words can't really describe or explain this "seeing." But, you knew it when it happened. You were seeing with heart, with a unique sensitivity. Some days you began the day with such a heart. Some days, no matter the town or the area, you struggled, you walked around knowing you were half-blind. But, you kept going thinking that the breakthrough was coming.

If ever anyone thought of the phrase "on a mission for God," it was limited to the Blues Brothers movie - which was popular at the time. We were out-of-towners. Strangers. We were not locals. And we weren't Fuller brush men/women, or volunteers with a political party canvassing the neighborhood. People often looked back at us as if confused - who are you? It was written all over their faces. "Who are you again?" "What did you say you were selling?" Are you from here? Many, many, many - most, said "No." With luck it was "No thank you." But, some, amazingly enough, put aside their doubts and simply welcomed the offer, no questions asked. Big hearts, alive and well on the east side!

Fundraising days started early in the morning - the first drop-off by 8am or so. But first, showers that

couldn't last long. The brothers were stuffed into one motel room with one bathroom. The sisters in another - also with only one shower. Then, back in the Blue Whale and time for an inspirational reading, a prayer and then gassing up on yogurt, nuts, and bananas - eaten in the van on the way to the first drop off of the day. Once on the ground, you stashed the extra product either at a business that gave permission or in a safe - secret spot. Then you would look up and down the strip - usually the main drag - and just feel it - make a quick assessment of the good, the bad, and the hard-to-access areas to fundraise. When I was fundraising and not driving, I often looked for the nearest bakery-coffee shop. There I would bathe in the comfy hominess of the place, drink coffee, always more than a few cups - to get rolling - and place my boxes on the counter so just by luck I could catch the interest of the waitresses. Waitresses were a good bet - talkative, sympathetic - generally true, but not an absolute. I always felt that if God were to live anywhere in town, it would be at the coffee shops - especially the ones with baked goods (a personal bias). Coffee shops were there to fill people up with warmth and food, baked goods filling deep needs (another personal bias).

Fundraising could be lonely. Dropped off in your town or neighborhood, or strip, to love with your very special peanut clusters, it was only you... and God, if you were able to get over yourself. Alone to wander the town, you were tasked with figuring out which area to work - the new apartments, or the modest neighborhood homes across the railroad tracks, or the business park down the alternate truck route. In every place, in every circumstance, you learned to follow your intuition - you worked your intuition as if it were a muscle. The more you used it, the stronger it got. You learned to read the opportunities. Wealthy, smart-looking homes, on large lots, long driveways, with tidy and well-groomed landscaping took too much time and too often the result was rejection. Something about knocking on the door of the wealthy - like bad manners. The houses down across the railroad tracks with tiny front yards, the fence in need of repair were almost always the better choice. But no matter the fundraising area, it was the journey inside - the diving down into yourself to find love, the recognition of God and God in every kind of person. But there inside your busy mind, and unsettled heart, instead of love you would sometimes find buried memories of failure. Each day you found a different you. Each day there were things to overcome. Each day a search for humility and an unselfish motivation. Motivation was always key in moving beyond self-doubt and fear. You didn't always break through but you were always learning. The rejection, and the suffering were the way forward.

There were very real external obstacles too: the secretary in the lobby who looked at you skeptically, measuring you as if she were the jailer and you were the felon. If only you could connect with her - positively - would you make it round to all the many offices beyond her? Or around the man in apartment 1A who tells you there is no soliciting in the building, challenging your right to be there? If only you can connect with him authentically, sincerely, will he oblige without a fuss, as if he were a troll and you the one to pay up? Or the bartender who allowed you to go table to table but then had second thoughts as you sold box after box and he got to thinking about the money he may be losing, and so, after he nods in the direction of the door, and waves a finger, you wander back out the door, waving rather meekly a hand of thanks, a humble way of avoiding any confrontation?

There were few real confrontations, though, on occasion you came upon a circumstance that all the sincerity in the world could not cure. Not being local, there were a few times where the local police came to have a talk. In Mountain Home, Idaho the police had us rounded up after receiving calls about "strangers" in town. At the police station the sheriff talked my leg off - captain to captain. Oddly, we became in short order long-lost friends, pals, buddies. All the odder was that he kept apologizing for having detained us. Maybe he saw that we were not aliens from another planet invading his town - despite the hysterics of those who called in to warn him. Maybe the team could have been a bit more compassionate to those whose doors we knocked on, causing less fear or doubt. Hard to say.



It was in Bremerton during the busy holiday fundraising that I was confronted by a Hare Krishna devotee. Claiming I was encroaching on his turf - as if he owned the place. He tried using karate to kick me off a corner where I was offering roses. The police came after a few kicks and a few jabs, alerted by the hundreds of Christmas shoppers just trying to avoid our lame version of the Karate Kid. The police officers got a cheap thrill, and a few cheap laughs upon arresting us - two do-gooders fighting over a corner spot, Christian versus Hindu. Not exactly role models of peace and nonviolence.

On one trip, out east to Yakima, Mike K. was the assistant. He and I were often paired together. Mike was from an Irish Catholic family. He grew up in Pennsylvania in a town where his mother was the mayor. Mike was an athlete, short but built strong and thick - like a linebacker, agile yet tough as tree bark. On one occasion, Mike and I participated in a church 40-day offering - where we took turns waking up

around 3:30am to get our new boat ready for salmon fishing by 5am. It was a "condition" to establish our commitment to fishing. On our first morning, we got our small aluminum boat out to Shilshoe Bay. Ready to shove off, we paused to pray - grateful for the ocean, for the salmon, for the opportunity. Mike's prayer started at a reasonable volume and picked up pace as we headed out beyond the levy. His eyes were closed as were mine. His prayer grew stronger, his lungs bellowing out his gratitude with force. Beyond the levy, the waves met the bow of the boat with a repetitive rap - an aluminum drumbeat now competing with Mike's hollering prayer. The prayer continued. Mike was caught up in the spirit. And then - a crash, a thud and bounce up onto the rocks of the levy. Mike, so involved with his prayer, had turned the boat around back in the direction of the dike. Shocked, it took us a few moments to realize our reversal. We had survived the almighty prayer and crash. The boat was christened now with a dent in the bow - our pride taking the bigger dent.

As the assistant, Mike was expected to demonstrate how fundraising - fundraising as pilgrimage - was done. He fundraised with passion, with his heart on his sleeve, and like a linebacker - running continually, always searching for the next person to fundraise - tackling people with his passion. His athleticism meant he would travel 20 miles or more in a day, and nearly always make his goals - both internal and external. And every day Mike had a Bible's worth of stories to tell - often about other Christians whom he met. Some very supportive and some wanting to convert Mike on the spot, believing his belief fell short. Mike loved the conversation with Christians and at times spent extra time with them talking about theology and philosophy. Better to say to yourself - "Okay, enough's enough and so no more give and take" and move on. But, Mike had the gift of gab and rarely just moved on.

Hard to digest were the fundamentalist Christians living in a straightjacket of Bible verses. In some cases, their conclusion: "some of us humans are worthy to be loved and some are not." It seemed to me that this was a hell of their own making. We all did our best to not overreact to such religious fundamentalism. In fairness, most Christians, even those who sought to sword-fight with Bible verses in a sort of awkward duel - were sincere, authentic and generous.

On one trip out east, Mike and I were again paired, taking a team of brothers and sisters who were out in the field for just their first or second time. The team could learn a lot from Mike, I thought, and so, after dropping Mike off in a Safeway parking lot, I parked just across the street so we all could watch Mike in action. Mike was a fundraising champion. (Later, Mike would earn a black belt in Karate, travel to Russia and teach karate, then start his own wholesale business in the Bay Area.)

On this particular morning, I noticed he was unusually tired. He had worked hard the day before. I had failed to notice that maybe he needed some extra rest or maybe a bigger something for breakfast - than the regular yogurt and nuts. So, after we parked across the street we noticed that Mike had left the parking lot to go inside the Safeway. I was just beginning to wonder what the heck was going on when Mike came out of the store and with a large box of donuts - where he proceeded to eat the entire box, as if it were the last supper. The team all stared, not knowing how exactly to respond. It was awkward, like seeing the king with no clothes. This was on me. Not my finest hour. The brother needed food, rest. Fundraising was hard work, physically and spiritually.

Each day had its high points, and low moments. Not everyone gives. Some days only a few. You try not to take it personally. You give a heartfelt hello, a quick spiel, as freely as you can - with no tie to a certain result - just grateful to see them and give your spiel, rejection as natural as hiccups. It was like you were stone to be carved down to your essence by the people you met - each person - chipping away all the unnecessary parts of yourself. Sometimes that was hard as heck to take. You begin to doubt yourself, your own worth, your ability to love. You say to yourself, "You are part of a spiritual movement that sees true love as the key. If you don't have love, what in the hell are you doing out here in Sunnyside, Washington asking for help?"

Fundraising was not everyone's Pepsi; or everyone's cup of tea. For some, traveling snug, packed into the van like sardines, with an almost total loss of personal space, could cause some stress. Talking to strangers all day - not easy for the shy or the cerebral. Persecution from the very religious for not belonging to the right faith, and being so wrong, so of the devil, as to not be worthy of forgiveness or compassion. It could feel dehumanizing. And the physical exertion was a challenge for the body and the mind. Some days it could be miles and miles of steep streets, or apartments with lots of stairs, working parking lots where you needed to jog around the lot like a tennis player working the court. Weather could nick your spirit a bit - the cold rain of the Washington west side in fall and winter - the sun popping heat of the east side in summer and fall. In the process - like in all pilgrimages - you find out about yourself.

Many days were a triumph - you felt touched by love, by the people, and by God. Other days you stumbled across the finish line wondering if you were worthy of love or happiness. Either way, the adventure shaped you. Our pilgrimage was a journey to meet strangers and love them - with our box of chocolates. After several months, with the fundraising trip long since in the rear-view mirror, you realized how you had changed. The pilgrimage led to suffering, and the suffering prepared for a seed to grow into a tree, a tree now rooted in the earth.